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ABSTRACT

Citing studies by the National Assessment of Educational Progress and by Dolores Durkin, this paper argues that students are not being taught higher level comprehension skills, such as inference, and presents hypotheses explaining this failure. The paper suggests that emphasis on skills and drills and the typical programed format advanced by prepackaged teaching materials are not conducive to developing divergent thinking, an ability necessary for inferential and critical reading. The paper gives suggestions intended to encourage teachers to try more innovative and creative teaching methods, rather than following lockstep, the instruction from typical reading workbooks or learning kits. (HTH)

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TEACHERS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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TEACHERS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

In the late 1960's the Education Commission of the States founded the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a research project mandated by Congress to collect and report data, over time, on the performance of young Americans aged 9, 13, and 17. The results of the national evaluations of reading, made in 1970-71, 1974-75, and 1979-80, are reported in the Spring 1981 NAEP Newsletter and in the official publication of the report, available from the offices of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 1981).

Comparisons for the decade showed 9 year-olds making very significant improvements, particularly among the blacks, who showed a narrowing of the gap between themselves and the nation by six (6) percentage points, or a ten year gain of 9.9 percentage points. White 9 year-olds showed an overall improvement over this period of only 2.8 percentage points. This age level, both white and black showed improvement in all three of the tested areas of reading: literal, reference abilities, and inferential skills.

For the 13 year-olds, however, the picture was not as consistent. While literal reading improved only slightly (1.6 percentage points) inferential skills showed no improvement over the ten years.

The performance of the 17 year-olds over the decade carried through the trend begun by the 13 year-olds. Their performance over the 10 year period remained unchanged in the areas of literal comprehension and reference skills, but inferential skills showed a significant decline of 2.1 percentage points. During this same decade, but including almost two decades now, the College Board of Princeton, New Jersey has shown a dramatic, yearly drop in Scholastic Aptitude Scores. In 1980, high school senior performance on the verbal section of the test indicated that only about half as many students scored above 650

as did their counterparts of just eight years before (U. S. N. & W. R., 1981).

This period of the sixties and seventies was marked by much anticipation. The federal government's expenditures for public education were colossal, and the innovations of our rapidly developing age of technology, including computers, into the educational milieu, seemed to guarantee that every kid would be a winner. Also, in the seventies, state legislation began calling for competency-based programs for schools, and teachers were introduced to the watchdogs of accountability.

Yet the positive change in achievement has been only partially successful, as the data above suggest. Data from the National Assessment studies indicate that pupils continue to do well, or even show some improvement for each progress age measured for literal reading and reference skills, but in the area of inference, including recognizing main ideas, and reading critically, students begin to score poorly by the time they reach middle school and continue to do so through and beyond high school. That is, students are learning convergent skills, or "just what the book says," but to go beyond the text, to think through divergently what a text means, are higher level cognitive skills not being learned by today's students.

The reasons for this failure, beginning at the middle school level, are at best hypotheses. One reason may be very simply that higher level thinking skills, i.e., going beyond the book to forming inferences, main ideas, and a critical analysis of the whole, require a higher level of intelligence than do the literal skills of locating details and learning reference skills.

Another hypothesis is that this poor showing in the higher level reading skills reflects the programmed type of detailistic materials that have been a part of so many curricula during this time. Further, pressure by legislation

to return to the basics may have caused over-emphasis in the basic skills to the detriment of the higher cognitive skills. Higher level skills development takes time and much student involvement - more time, perhaps, than the teacher feels she has when faced with the requirements to get students to pass the state mandated basic skills tests.

One of the most talked about studies made in the last decade on student achievement in reading comprehension was by Delores Durkin. This report supports the last hypothesis mentioned. Her study investigated the activities of some 27 teachers of reading and social studies for a period of 300 hours. Her findings were surprising, if not shocking. A total of 0.63 per cent of this time (less than one percent - less than one minute per hour) was spent in meaningful activities to help a pupil learn main ideas, inferences, and critical thinking, and indeed, any of the attributes of comprehension. Durkin found in the 27 classrooms visited that most of the activities were assessment rather than instructional in nature. Questions were almost entirely geared to a single answer with the only teacher response being "that's right" or "that's wrong," thus making this an assessment rather than an instructional activity. Giving assignments, basic skills instruction by ditto, and correcting papers made up the rest of the time. In a summary of the study, Durkin stated that the data portrayed teachers as "mentioners," assignment givers and checkers, and interrogators. New vocabulary was hardly introduced, and if at all, no more than once for a given word. The use of workbooks and ditto sheets was overwhelming and totally beyond expectation. These constituted almost all of the instructional programs. If comprehension instruction was attempted, for some strange reason the instruction usually was given several days after the story on which the instruction was attempted had been read. It appeared to Durkin that it was "believed that the quality of an instructional program is directly related to the number of completed assignment

sheets. After all, isn't this evidence of back to basics?" Yet, according to Durkin, comprehension cannot be taught directly, but situations must be provided for processing out inferential or critical meaning through give-and-take between student, other students, and the teacher (Durkin, 1978-1979).

In a follow-up study, Durkin reviewed five basal reading series, kindergarten through grade 6, to learn what they suggested for comprehension instruction. A summary of her findings showed that "like the teachers, the manuals give far more attention to assessment and practice than to direct, explicit instruction. When procedures for teaching children how to comprehend are provided, they tend to be brief. Such brevity is not unlike what was referred to in the report of the classroom observation study as "mentioning" (Durkin, 1981).

The teacher, then, is faced with a variety of possibilities as to why her students may be poor in the areas of comprehension, especially in the higher level skills. Of course, more importantly, she must decide what can be done to improve the students' knowledge of these skills. As a point of discussion, consider the hypothesis that the problem may be at least in part due to an over-emphasis on literal skills training coupled with work book programmed types of materials that lend themselves particularly to a rote memory, low-level association type learning.

According to Durkin's findings, it is apparent that simply following the typical basal reader will not produce results. Neither will teaching done in the manner reported by Durkin in her earlier study. A tempting solution is to try first one and then another of the pre-packaged materials from the stockpile of teacher aids. But without careful diagnosis as to what each student's real needs are, a too rich diet of skills-drills programmed materials will turn the students off for good - the poorer students because the work is often meaningless to them, and the good ones because they

already know the skills supposedly taught by the drill activity. Further, it would be interesting to put the typical workbook/kit/programmed materials to the evaluation that Durkin gave the basal readers. My own guess is that the same weaknesses would be noted - almost all assessment and practice with little or no direct, explicit instruction.

Some time ago the Wisconsin niece of my long-time associate at our reading clinic asked her aunt if the schools in South Carolina had learning centers in them. Aunt said "yes," and niece said vehemently, "I hate them. You have to do an exercise in this center and then you go to the next and do an exercise, and then you have to go to the next center. Why can't they ever just let us read a book?" While niece, who is an excellent reader, does not represent all children, and perhaps not even a majority, how many kids, I wonder, who need little more than practice to be good readers are still caught in the circle of doing what is for them busy work from materials that are in no way related to their measured needs or interests?

Joseph Renzulli (1977), in his guide for developing defensible programs for the gifted and talented describes a companion technique for destroying a love for reading and learning in the able student. This is the practice of moving this able student once he has mastered the basics, from the highly structured institutionalized basic skills-drills programs into the highly structured process based materials built around Guilford's Intellect Model or Blooms taxonomy. Here again learning is fractionated into highly artificial kinds of experiences which are supposed to teach the student how to think and reason. But kids, and grown-ups, learn to think and reason in the setting of real problems - in the context of problems meaningful to them.

I can illustrate from my own experience this tendency to think that because a variety of materials are available they must be also useful keys

to our immediate purposes. In 1971 the Indian Government was interested in setting up reading programs for its administrators, and I had the task of training the teachers for this endeavor at the Indian Institute of Administration at New Delhi. I took with me several voice tape programs with their related paper materials and a dozen cassette tape players to be used as modular study materials for individual work outside class. The expense for these training units was considerable, I might add. The tapes seemed like a wonderful idea, for the official language of the Central Indian Government is English, and most of the graduate students I was to teach spoke English like native Englishmen, except for some small differences in dialectical sound patterns that seemed to run words together, at least to my hearing. So what happened? The taped programs were useless. The students could not follow the voices on the tape, although, as I said, the dialectical differences seemed minimal. I've thought about that experience many times since, and I'll venture some guesses as to why the taped programs didn't work.

First, taped language is not real speech - it is only a symbolic representation of someone's voice from another place at another time, just like a photograph is not a real person, but is an agreed upon symbolic representation. Also, communication by language is made up of much more than sound. The gestures of the speaker, his smiles, frowns, and all the non-verbal patterns that make up speech are absent on voice tape. Further, American idiomatic expressions are somewhat different than the common British idiom. Also, American education has a jargon all its own - rather difficult to follow even by another American not tutored in the language of educational jargonese. Thus it was, that with no common gestures to interpret them, the tapes became unintelligible once the listener fell behind the speaker's flow of language. In a face-to-face language situation, the same flow of language could have been understood, for the speaker would have noted his audience's confusion

and slowed down or said the same thing in a different way. Further, his non-verbal actions would have given meaning to words or idioms not fully understood.

Now, think for a minute of your use of the tape cassette. Language tapes are very popular, as you well know, being used in many reading programs with "read along" books and the like. Have you ever wondered if your student listeners could really understand the language of the tapes? After all, your listeners are probably far less sophisticated than were my graduate students in India. Research, as you probably know, has finally decided that dialectical differences within our classrooms have little detrimental effect on learning to read. While this may very well be true and my own observations tend to support this idea, I will still contend that where canned language instruction or readings are involved by tapes or records, dialectical differences may cause enough listening confusion that the taped message will be largely rejected.

Another facet that is simply the other side of the over-use of commercial materials is the under-use of student-teacher creations. This is a technique that we should use more often. But we have made commercial materials so universally available, students are given little opportunity to be creative or enter into the teaching-learning task except in a relatively passive way. An illustration that comes to mind is not directly related to classroom learning but it does illustrate the need for a learner to enter into the full process, not just the giving of little unimportant answers in the learning sequence. Some years ago a minister friend of mine told me the following story from his experiences as a pastor in a rural West Virginia church. He had a small daughter who became very interested in making things like little dolls and whatever else a child might imagine to make out of pieces of wood she gathered from about the premises. The father felt very badly about the

fact that his daughter had no proper toys, and noting her interest in creating things from raw materials, he spent his last dollar to buy her a set of Lincoln logs. And a funny thing happened: Carolyn never again went hunting around looking for odd sticks to make things; neither did she ever once play with the Lincoln logs. Her father had spoiled her play, in fact. What, after all, was the sense of searching for building materials when they had now been made available to her; but also, where was the fun of playing with something as uninteresting and non-creative as a Lincoln log? Something in such an order may have been the thought of young Carolyn. And if teachers don't spoil the fun of the quest in learning, parents do. Just a few days ago my young daughter told me that she had to make a model of Solomon's temple for school. While I privately wondered about the assignment, I still discussed with her the pros and cons of a variety of ways of doing it. Then she gave me this bit of information: "Charlie's father is building the temple for Charlie. Charlie's father, you see, is an architect." And I think of all the neat bulletin boards and stuff shown at science fairs and I wonder if Charlie's father, or maybe even Charlie's teacher, didn't make most of them; and for a poorly designed assignment, parents maybe ought to get their kids off the hook by doing it for them. But I contend that assignments needn't be purposeless but can be fun as well as instructive.

The preceding remarks and illustrations have indicated that keys that unlock learning are a part of a structure and organization that develops within the atmosphere of a teacher-student dialogue, and after the student needs have been assessed. Piaget has said that teaching means creating situations where structures can be discovered; it does not mean transmitting structures which may be assimilated at nothing other than a verbal level. Too often, I have suggested, we transmit the structure rather than creating possibilities for the pupil to invent and discover. The Association for

Supervision and Curriculum Development of the NEA has produced the publication, Learning and Mental Health in School. In it the authors discuss implications of a cognitive field theory that underscore the concept of Piaget. To quote them, "the primary function of the teacher is to help the students to discover problems that demand their personal attention. Giving students answers to problems they do not have short-circuits the whole process of learning by making exploration and reality testing by the students unnecessary and the problem unimportant" (NEA, 1966).

What criteria should be considered in the selection of keys to a structure for learning? First of all, as we have suggested, it should be student-centered. Also, a project or structure that becomes a key for learning should be capable of engendering opportunity to practice in a meaningful setting all the subskills that are required for completion of the project or problem. Once the educational pump is primed, the learning processes should be self-regenerating by the nature of the learning activities. This self-actuating process should be in the model of a spiral. That is, growth in the language stemming from the project produces a larger stock of words recognized in writing which produces greater comprehension ability which creates a greater background for critical evaluation. But this spiral of learning is not a thin line; it accumulates breadth and depth, with each of the skills interacting with the others, giving words, comprehension, and critical evaluation the context of language in use, rather than the barren context of a few miscellaneous words strung together.

A real key in developing reading at the higher level is the acceptance of the fact that the student really wants to know, that he is curious, and that he has built-in needs that he can learn to satisfy through honest materials that we can help him discover. Books and materials dealing with the prime motivators of love and affection, belonging, approval, independence,

adequacy, prestige, the love of adventure, curiosity, and the thrill of discovery are all tied in to the reader's search to satisfy the developmental tasks of growing up, of meeting the expectancies of his society, and of explaining the mysteries of his own maturation and development. Insightful guidance will accept these as the true source of motivation, rather than the bits and pieces from mechanistic technology that may have little in common with Bertha's or Henry's real needs.

Looking fairly objectively at the last 15 years it would seem safe to say that the period was dominated by many innovations, especially in hardware and a plethora of kit type materials which were incapable of developing the kind of skills that can only be developed by teacher-student interaction: that is, the Mark Hopkins log with a teacher at one end and a kid at the other. The education process is a human relationship. It is the teacher, I am firmly convinced, that makes the difference in what a pupil learns. This fact was clearly indicated in the 27 reading studies by HEW in 1964-1965. While studies do not prove the relationship entirely, I postulate that where the personal give and take with the teacher is lessened, worthwhile learning will also be lessened, especially where the higher level reading skills are concerned. Divergent behavior is not taught through convergent practice.

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